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ABSTRACT

This document describes the Accelerated Associate's Degree Program for Licensed Practical Nurses (LPN) at the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico. The program, targeting unemployed LPNs living in San Juan, Puerto Rico, allows students to complete an associate's degree in one year. Fifty-four students enrolled during the first year and 50% of these students were employed LPNs, despite the focus on unemployed nurses. The measures of program success reported in the study are a 73% retention rate, a 56% graduation rate, and a 95% pass rate on the Associate Nursing Board Exam. Essential program components include: (1) strong commitment by university administrators to accommodate the learning needs of non-traditional students (e.g., granted credit for competencies developed as part of LPN training through placement exams and modification of financial aid policies); (2) implementation of innovative teaching methods (e.g., introduction of trimester format and tutorial sessions); (3) provision of academic support and case management services; and (4) development of strong relationships between university and local hospitals. Program challenges include faculty that were not trained to work with non-traditional students and the need to add an extra trimester to the program to accommodate students who fail courses. Appended is the interview protocol. (RC)

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Creating Career Ladders in University Systems: The Accelerated Associate's Degree Program for Unemployed Licensed Nurses at the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico

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Edwin Meléndez

Principal Investigator

Creating Career Ladders in University Systems: The Accelerated Associate's Degree Program for Unemployed Licensed Nurses at the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico

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Summary

Thirty Licensed Practical Nurses completed an innovative accelerated associate's degree nursing program at the Inter American University. The one-year program, three trimesters and two summer sessions, provided financial and academic assistance to disadvantaged students living in the metropolitan area of San Juan, Puerto Rico. The program allowed students to take advanced placement exams in areas they already covered as part of their practical nursing training, which further reduced the time spent in the classroom. By training unemployed LPNs to pass the Registered Nursing (RN) Board exam, the program increased their chances for better employment, and increased the pool of registered nurses serving the health care needs of their communities. The program achieved extraordinary success as measured by several conventional indicators. The program boasted a retention rate of 73 percent, which is about average for students enrolled in a regular two-year associate's degree Nursing degree program. The 95 percent of students who passed the Associate's Nursing Board exam is slightly higher than average. What makes these outcomes remarkable is that these students were non-traditional, economically and educationally disadvantaged, and that they completed the program in a shorter time than regular students. These major achievements were possible because of students' commitment, the efforts of a full-time program coordinator, the constant support of the nursing school administration, and the dedication of the nursing faculty.

Several Factors Contributing to the Success of the Program

- Perhaps the most important factor was that the university administration, in general, and the nursing school leadership, in particular, made a strong commitment to the success of the program. Although the program had to confront a series of problems, as is common in the initial stages of any new initiative, the nursing school administration implemented numerous institutional changes to accommodate the learning needs of non-traditional students. They extended the accelerated program an extra trimester to accommodate students' academic requirements and personal circumstances; they granted accreditation based on practical experience through written exams and practice tests; and they waived Math and English pre-requisites for admission. These initiatives are even more significant in the context of a large university system, which rarely offers associate's degrees.
- In addition to institutional changes the nursing school administration promoted the use of innovative teaching methods to facilitate students' learning. Promoting new instructional practices in the classroom is never without perils, however the program was able to negotiate every challenge.
- The program also provided academic support services and case management to participating students. The program called upon the services of the financial aid staff to offer orientation workshops, and the program offered study habit tutorial sessions as a way to supplement classroom instruction and to help students overcome academic shortcomings. The program also appointed a full-time program coordinator who provided overall orientation, information, and advocacy.
- The nursing school at the Inter American University maintains a close professional relationship with a number of local hospitals through the in-hospital practices students are required to perform as part of their training. Through these connections the program links the students to prospective employers, remains abreast of current in-hospital practices and approaches, and is able to develop cooperative ventures involving professional development of hospital staff, instructors, and university students.

Because of these factors and initiatives the Inter American University of Puerto Rico associate's degree nursing program exemplifies the potential role that university systems can play in creating career ladders for non-traditional students.

Creating Career Ladders in University Systems:

The Accelerated Associate's Degree Program for Unemployed Licensed Nurses at the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges in workforce development is the creation of programs that advance adult, non-traditional students employed in low-skilled occupations to more complex roles and responsibilities within an industry. The health industry is a

typical example of an industry with a great potential for the implementation of career ladders for incumbent or displaced workers. But in spite of this great potential for workers' progressive acquisition of skills and competencies, very few institutions offer programs that promote a continuum of education and work experiences. In this case study we explore in detail an ambitious program designed to help displaced or unemployed workers reach a higher step in their career development. The Accelerated Associate's Degree Program for Practical Nurses brings together a series of institutional and academic innovations in order to service the needs of a targeted population within a large and complex university system.

The Accelerated Associate's Degree Program for Unemployed Practical Nurses is designed to address the acute shortage of registered nurses (RNs) in Puerto Rico, and in particular in the San Juan Metropolitan Area. The program provides skill training and employment opportunities to a large number of practical nurses, currently suffering from a high rate of unemployment. The high unemployment among practical nurses, who are often women experiencing social, academic, and economic disadvantages, is further compounded by recent changes in the health delivery system. The health care delivery system in Puerto Rico is de-emphasizing public health services, exemplified by the public community health centers, and giving a primary role to private delivery, which emphasizes the development of proprietary primary care centers. Private health care centers generally prefer to hire registered nurses. This shift that is taking place in the health delivery system undermines the employability of practical nurses.

Generally, registered nursing programs require licensed nurses to repeat subjects already covered as part of the practical nursing program, which often discourages practical nurses from pursuing further training. There have been very few responses to this problem. In 1995, the Teagle Foundation Initiative, sponsored through the School of Nursing at North Carolina A & T University, five projects designed to provide Bachelor's of Sciences in Nursing degrees for Licensed Practical Nurses. A year later, in 1996, Hawaii Pacific University began offering five accelerated paths, one of which offered advanced standing to licensed nurses as part of their BSN degree program. Hawaii Pacific University LPN/BSN Pathway offers accreditation for previous knowledge in the areas of Pharmacology, Math and Meds, and Nursing Concepts and Process through written and performance evaluations. Courses in the program are scheduled in a two-evenings-per-week format.

The Inter American University Accelerated Associate's Degree Program offers Licensed Practical Nurses the possibility of completing an associate's degree in 12 months. The program schedules courses in 3 trimesters and 2 summer sessions, provides academic advice and financial support, credits competencies developed as part of LPN training through placement exams, and in the process develops a model pathway for LPNs which can be replicated in Puerto Rico and the United States.

The Inter American University of Puerto Rico is a Christian, non-profit, private institution founded in 1912 as the Polytechnic Institute of Puerto Rico by Reverend J. Will Harris. The first university level courses were offered in 1921, and by 1927 the

institute granted its first bachelor's degrees. The Inter American is the most important private university in Puerto Rico, with an enrollment of 44,000 students (1994), representing almost 25 percent of the university-level student population in Puerto Rico, and 40 percent of all students enrolled in private universities. The regular academic year is divided in two semesters and two summer sessions. A trimester schedule is also available for English-speaking students. Because of its geographic location—the university has campuses in different regions of the island—and the services it provides to students and the community, the university is attractive and accessible to a large percentage of the population.

Three important characteristics distinguish the Inter American University case study when compared to the other three community colleges discussed in this study. First, it is evident from the above description that in contrast to the other colleges, the Inter American University is primarily a four-year, bachelor's degree granting institution. Only since 1996 the university began offering associate's degrees in nursing. Most of the students have enrolled in this type of program as a bridge towards a bachelor's degree. Since many students have to work a significant amount of time to support themselves and their families, having an associate's degree improves both their employability and their earnings. An associate's degree is also an exit option for those students who have difficulties continuing towards a bachelor's degree for economic, academic, personal, and work-related reasons.

Secondly, and perhaps as import, these innovations that accommodate different "customer" needs and preferences for degree options and formats (evening programs, trimester formats within a semester system, and other flexible scheduling of classes) have been introduced in the context of a large university system. The majority of students at the Inter-American University are typically college-age, attend day classes, and usually have a full-time student status. The nursing school and the university as a whole have made a concerted effort to create programs to attract a diverse student population. Programs such as the Accelerated Associate's Degree Program targeting LPNs require significant changes in administrative structures and involve a certain degree of risk taking, not very common in higher education. To accommodate the needs of non-traditional students requires administrators, teachers, and staff to have a tremendous awareness at the institutional of the different cultural and socioeconomic needs of these populations. The nursing school administration, particularly the director and other program staff had to meet numerous challenges regarding students' academic preparation, along with the demands that students face from family and work, and their struggles to adapt to university life. They were able to accommodate students' needs through innovative programming, the institution of the trimester system, and special tutorial sessions. By meeting these needs they created the administrative context and promoted the institutional cultural changes necessary to help students achieve success.

Finally, the Inter-American University is located in Puerto Rico, a commonwealth of the United States, where the majority of the population are Spanish speaking Puerto Ricans. Not only is this the only case in our study in which a university system serves as the institutional context, but it is also the only instance where the cultural

differences of the students participating in the program are related to their economic status rather than to their race or ethnicity. This situation is fundamentally different from the conditions experienced by Hispanic students enrolled in community colleges located in mainland United States. Only in Albuquerque's TVI, Hispanics constituted a majority of the student population in the college. At Miami Dade-County Community College and New York Borough of Manhattan Community College Hispanics constituted a smaller portion of the student population. In this context the advocacy role of program coordinators took a different form depending on each institutional case. At IUPR the program coordinator, Professor Maria Berrios, worked on a leadership team integrated by the nursing school director, Dr. Gloria Ortiz, and the program designer, Professor Eugenia Pérez. Problems were therefore tackled as a team, and interventions affected the administrative level as well as the academic and student support levels.

Creating change within an established higher education system is rarely without challenges and contradictions. We have learned from this case study that it is possible to create career ladders within the structure of traditional academic systems. Implementation of the Inter American Associate's Degree program required changing many norms and regulations within the larger institution, and the enthusiastic participation of dedicated faculty and staff. However, when everything is said and done the outcome of the program speaks for itself. Thirty students completed the program in five trimesters, 95 percent of the students who took the Associate's Degree Nursing Board exam passed, and after two years of implementation, the university has adopted the trimester Associate's Degree program permanently as part of its degree programs. From this perspective, the IUPR is an example of an institution that accomplished the objectives of the HACU demonstration programs.

Program Background

Nursing students at the Inter American University enroll at the Carmen Torres de Tiburcio School of Nursing, which has been offering Bachelor of Science Degrees in Nursing since 1978 and Associate's Degrees in Nursing since 1996. It currently has approximately 280 students, 85 percent female and 15 percent male, 58 percent reside in the metropolitan area, and 80 percent depend on PELL Grants and loans. The increase in financial aid to students, both from federal funds and from the Commonwealth has allowed many students to obtain a university education. In 1996, the Metropolitan Campus began implementation of a four-year baccalaureate program that allows an exit option with an associate's degree after two years. More recently, as a result of their involvement in the Community Service Project of the Inter American University, the school of nursing was able to identify the need for employment in the communities, and recognized the potential of an accelerated associate's degree program for LPNs.

The career and financial possibilities available to RN graduates are very promising. A survey conducted by the Inter American University, which targeted graduates from 1989 to 1992, indicated that 93 percent of nursing graduate respondents were working. The same document reported that 97 percent had passed state board RN exams for licensure, 31 percent pursued graduate level work, and 75 percent planned to do

so in the near future. According to the 1995 Occupational Employment Survey (available in 1997) the average salary for nursing graduates was about $ 1,200 a month or $14,400 per year. This report produced by the Department of Labor and Human Resources indicates that the wages of RNs are very similar to comparable health care workers in Puerto Rico, such as Physical Therapists, and Occupational Therapists.

Applicants to the Carmen Torres Accelerated Associate's Degree in Nursing were required to have a certificate of completion from a Licensed Practical Nursing program, and evidence of at least one year of clinical experience in an acute or chronic care setting in Puerto Rico within the last five years. Applicants had to be unemployed, and had to comply with other general admission requirements of the university.

The majority of applicants responded to newspaper advertisements, or learned about the program from a friend, coworker, or supervisor, since announcements were faxed to nurse supervisors at several local hospitals. The first class had an enrollment of 54 students, selected after administrators interviewed 87 applicants. This class was composed of 48 females and 6 males, 55 percent were married, 13 percent were divorced, and 28 percent were single. The average age was 34.6 years old, and their nursing experience ranged between 1 to 20 years, with an average of 5.6 year's work in the field. Although one of the admission requirements was that applicants be currently unemployed, 50 percent of those accepted to the program were working.* This is clearly a non-traditional student population: older, with practical experience well beyond formal education, and academic disadvantages.

Support Services

The support services offered to the first class of the Accelerated Associate's Degree Program included a financial aid package, and academic support and advice.

Financial Aid Packages

Part of the attraction of the Inter American University accelerated program was the scholarship and a stipend the nursing school offered to all students for the duration of the academic year. The financial aid package covered the university tuition for the duration of the program and offered a range of stipends depending on the employment status of the student. An early problem the program faced was the late notification of the funding granted by their sponsor, the US Department of Labor (USDOL). According to the program administrator, the school was notified that their federal funding had been approved only three weeks before classes were to begin. By this late date the university fees had gone up, but the program, with permission from the DOL, the sponsoring agency, redistributed the stipend. The stipend awarded was $1,050 for the unemployed student, and $190 for those employed. In addition, almost all the students enrolled in the program qualified for federal PELL Grants because of their low-income status. The stipends allow the students to purchase books and supplies for each session.

A second problem experienced by the program had more to do with students'

expectations regarding their financial assistance. To be sure, the accelerated nursing program addressed the financial concerns of the students by providing financial aid workshops for the students and orientation discussions for financial aid clerks to make them aware of the new trimester program. The nursing school administration requested the participation of two financial aid officers to offer a financial aid workshop. The financial aid officers tried to explain the nature of financial aid as it is structured at the Inter American University, as well as the best way to finance students' education through Pell grants, school-based loans, and bank loans. Another purpose of the financial aid workshop, in addition to the demystification of the financial aid process, was to introduce the financial aid officers as ongoing resources for the students. Students of the trimester nursing program could call upon these officers when they had financial aid questions. The orientation provided to financial aid workers was necessary because the trimester program, created in order to accommodate the shorter program designed specifically for experienced LPNs, clashed with accounting structures set up for a semester system. By requesting administrative extensions (prórrogas) the nursing school allowed program participants to register in a trimester program while their financial assistance was processed following the semester calendar. Nursing School Director, Dr. Gloria Ortiz, credits the support of the campus chancellor, Dr. Manuel J. Feiros, as one of the factors that allowed the institution to respond to the needs of the program.

Students, nevertheless, almost unanimously expressed concern with what they perceived as the inadequacy of the amounts granted as stipends. They were particularly distressed when they discovered the total cost of the program, such as the purchase of books, the cost of taking advance placement exams, and the fees involved in making up a failed class. The cost of taking the Basics of Nursing Practice 1122 placement exam (convalidación) was $95, while on average the cost of each nursing school textbook was around $60. Students also expressed concern over the expense associated with making up a failed class. While some graduate scholarship programs cover the cost of make-up courses, this is rare for undergraduate programs, and the students enrolled in the accelerated associate's degree program were required to pay the cost of repeating a subject. Due to its accelerated nature, on average, a trimester class at the Inter American University cost $600, which can be quite an investment for any student in Puerto Rico, particularly for an unemployed nurse or working LPN.

The program coordinator, Professor Maria Berrios, appointed to this role at the beginning of the program, had the responsibility of distributing students' stipends at the beginning of each session. This centralized arrangement allowed the students to interact, in all financial matters, with a sympathetic person who was aware of the financial issues students were confronting. In many cases she was called upon to assist students who were having problems requesting a loan from the university or who were denied financial aid. With her assistance, many students were able to negotiate successfully the process of requesting a grant or a loan. By appointing a full-time coordinator for the program, the nursing school administration recognized the many difficulties nontraditional students experience when they enter traditional institutions.

Academic Support and Academic Advice

The accelerated nature of the program is founded on the premise that LPNs' previous knowledge and experience allows them to complete a higher academic load in shorter time than students without nursing experience. The specific admission requirements and entry interviews aimed to select students who were both qualified to tackle the academic load, and motivated enough to complete the rigorous year-long program. Admissions to the accelerated nursing program were made through the adult ADVANCE Program because of the students' academically disadvantaged status. Since none of the applicants had taken College Board tests, and some didn't have the minimum GPA required for general admission to the university, their admission needed to be mediated by the ADVANCE program, which is designed to provide educational services to the adult population. The program offers flexible hours and modalities of study well suited for working adults. Students requesting admission to the ADVANCE program must be 21 years old or older, have a high school diploma or equivalent, and must be interviewed by the program they are interested in attending.

The nursing school administration appointed a full-time coordinator and academic adviser to offer close supervision and help to students, and to assist teachers in developing special academic strategies. Professor Maria Berrios, faculty member from the Department of Nursing Fundamentals, was appointed program coordinator and thus she became part of the school leadership team supervising the program. As part of her responsibilities, she mediated all interactions between the new students and the university administration, making it possible for the group to be treated as a whole. Because of her efforts students received help in mediating and facilitating their interactions with a institutional bureaucracy not familiar with the new nursing program. Because of her position she was better able to negotiate the institutional processes of university admissions and financial assistance for the students. She also became a student liaison in their interactions with the nursing faculty. One of the nursing instructors credits the role of the coordinator with the high levels of students retention in the program. For the second trimester, the retention rate was 81 percent.

Professor Berrios was often called upon to intercede when students felt that one of the instructors was making academic demands that they considered inappropriate given their age, experience, and outside responsibilities. For instance, she had to intercede on behalf of students' having difficulties with the Mathematics and English instructors. Students felt that the material was too demanding and that they did not have the necessary prerequisites. Unfortunately, some of the instructors remained very unresponsive to the particular needs of the students and unwilling to utilize new approaches in the classroom. This was the case of one Mathematics instructor who initially refused a request fromProfessor Berrios to use additional learning strategies. During the second quarter, 10 percent of the students failed the Mathematics class and 9 percent failed the English course. These levels of failure in these subjects are not unusual among traditional nursing students and are relatively low for non-traditional students. As it is, it is also difficult to determine whether the use of new teaching approaches can always improve students' performance. What is perhaps noteworthy

is the conflicting interactions between students and some faculty, which necessitated the mediation of the program coordinator. The program organizer, Professor Eugenia Pérez, recognized this problem, but explained that the delayed notification of their grant precluded the possibility of selecting faculty more appropriate for the program.

According to Professor Eugenia Pérez, the delayed notification also made it unfeasible to give admitted students a placement exam, which would have allowed the program to identify students' deficiencies in Mathematics and English skills. With that knowledge, she feels that the program could have offered remedial classes during the summer prior to the beginning of classes. As an alternative, the program offered tutorial sessions to supplement classroom discussions and laboratory practices. The tutorial sessions were ed when it became apparent that many students were particularly deficient in the areas of Mathematics, English, and Pharmacology. In addition, the program scheduled a Study Habits seminar offered by university counselor Carmen Valle.

The reaction of the students to the tutorial sessions was rather mixed. One instructor noted the contrast in the result of a questionnaire, where students requested more individualized help, with the low attendance at her tutorial sessions, held after classes. She was surprised and disappointed that "nobody showed up." Only 7 percent of the students attended the Mathematics tutorial sessions, there was no record of attendance for the English sessions, and 28 percent of the students attended the Pharmacology meetings. At this point it is difficult to determine the reasons why students failed to attend tutorial sessions, however, it is possible that the demands of working nurses attending an accelerated program conflicted with their otherwise strong motivation to complete the program successfully. Professor Eloisa Roldán, the instructor for the Nursing Fundamentals and Maternity Clinical Laboratory, offered her insight into this situation. She feels that all class objectives need to be met during class time because adult learners have many commitments that prevents them from studying at home, even the unemployed, because they also have many family obligations to fulfill.

In spite of their limitations, tutorial sessions were offered as part of the accelerated program for three reasons: to complement classroom instruction, ameliorate students' deficiencies, and to help students prepare to graduate from the program and attain a level of readiness to pass the nursing board examination. Professor Bertha Ugarte, the Care of Adult Patient instructor, who has also taught CLEP preparation courses through the Kaplan Preparation Services, had offered to teach tutorial sessions at the end of program, as a way of helping graduates to pass the board examinations. Board exams in Puerto Rico are offered twice a year, in November and May. Given that the first class of the accelerated nursing program graduated in December 1997, the first chance that this group could take Associate's Nursing Board Exams was in May 1998. Nineteen graduates of the accelerated trimester program took the exam in May, and 18 of these students or 95 percent passed it. The previous year, 93 percent of the students enrolled in the regular nursing program who took the Associate's Degree Option passed the Nursing Board Exam. These results speak well of the training and preparation that the accelerated program offered. Graduates of the program who do not pass the Nursing Board exam are allowed to take the exam three times. In the meantime they can still work as Licensed Practical Nurses.

In some cases tutorial sessions were also necessary in order to compensate for a poor match between a traditional instructor and the specific needs and circumstances of non-traditional students. While the accelerated Associate's Nursing Program faculty and coordinator unanimously acknowledge the general shortcomings of the typical nursing student in Mathematics, the students of the accelerated program may be particularly deficient in this area. A problem occurs when an instructor not trained to work with non-traditional students has to teach students with deficiencies in a given subject. An instructor can not, in good conscience, give a passing grade to an unprepared student. For students in the accelerated associate's program, however, some pre-requisites were waived to allow them to complete the program in a year. The tutorial sessions helped many students, and during the second quarter of the program, for example, only 10 percent of the students failed the Mathematics class, which is an average level of failure for traditional students taking that class.

Generally students who failed a class are required by the university to take the class over, but the accelerated nature of the program made that option too punitive for the students. The nursing school administration, recognizing the financial strain of repeating a class, petitioned the university to allow the students to make up the class by taking a make-up exam. The program assigned another instructor to teach the make-up classes. The make-up discussion session geared to prepare students to take the make-up Math exam, proved very effective because students who had failed the exam the first time, passed the second exam. Mario Funes is one student who found the Mathematics course difficult and failed it the first time but passed it after he attended review classes. Mario acknowledged his own difficulties in the class, but also characterized the Math instructor as rigid and inflexible. He described the make-up instructor as more communicative, more interested in students' success, and better able to get the group to understand the material. It is possible then that non-traditional nursing students might experience traditional styles of teaching as non-supportive and dismissive of their particular circumstances. This situation may compound the already difficult challenge of servicing non-traditional students. Just the same, by offering tutorial and review sessions, and by petitioning the university for a make-up exam option, the program supported the students having the greatest difficulties in a difficult class.

Unfortunately, this strategy is not always possible or the best alternative. During the third quarter, 54 percent of the students failed the Basics of Adult Care class. This case is significantly different from the previous case because the Adult Care class is an upper-level nursing course, and it is structured as lectures and in-hospital practicums taught by two different instructors. As such the class was divided in two sections and each section had a lecture and practice component. Grades for the class were determined by students' performance in the two components. Students who failed this class had the options of taking the class again the following trimester, or they could withdraw from the accelerated program and continue taking courses at their own pace, in the semester-long BSN program. All of the students who failed this course chose to take the class again the following trimester to graduate with the original group, and to complete the program in the shortest time. The director of the

nursing school, Dr. Gloria Ortiz, had to request special permission from the university to allow the students to carry the extra academic load. By and large students were able to negotiate the extra credits and were able to graduate at the end of the year.

By the end of the third trimester, however, this situation polarized students and faculty because all the students in one section of the class passed with high marks, while most of the students in the other section failed. Some nursing faculty members wondered whether some of their colleagues might be too demanding with associate's degree students. In turn students argued that there were no differences between the two groups, that the students in the group that failed worked as hard as the group that passed, and that the determining variables were the attitudes and expectations of the instructors. This in fact might have been another instance of poor match between a traditional instructor and non-traditional students. There were, however, some differences between the group that passed and the group that failed. While both groups had similar numbers of employed and unemployed students, there was a higher number of parents of small children in the group that failed, which may also explain why there were many more absentees in this group. This situation reflects the many challenges confronted by non-traditional students.

This situation also underscores the different attitudes within the faculty regarding non-traditional students. Some instructors felt that these students should adapt to the demands and requirements of the university, while others argued that the university had benefited from the influx of new students and therefore the university should be more responsive to students' circumstance. The former group of instructors found validation in the nursing tradition within which they were trained, while the latter sought new ways to respond to the challenges posed by the changing realities in society. The emergence of this conflict can be a healthy challenge for an institution because it can provide a path for growth. This experience illuminates the ongoing debate between practitioners of traditional pedagogy and those advocating a pedagogy that focuses on students' needs. Clearly, as this case indicates, the challenge to "customer"-oriented education is how to maintain academic standards while sufficiently preparing students to reach graduation and pass the RN boards exam.

Support to Students' Personal /Life Issues – Case Management

Initially the accelerated nursing program enrolled 54 students, but by the third quarter fourteen students had left the program. These numbers represent a 73 percent retention rate for a very demanding program. Some of the students withdrew because of the academically demanding nature of the program, but the majority had to leave because of personal issues. In some cases students were the sole care-takers of aging parents or relatives. More often, they cared for their children or younger members of the family, and in one case a student had to withdraw from the program as a result of emotional pressure following her spouse's suicide. While some of these circumstances may seem extreme, they are also common in disadvantaged communities. These circumstances often require the involvement of social service agencies that offer referrals as well as personalized counseling. By and large "integrated" counseling, that is, counseling

services that are "structurally" part of the educational package, are usually more effective in helping students deal with personal problems that interfere with the educational process. In the case of the accelerated nursing program, counseling was provided informally by some members of the faculty, either because of the nature of the class they taught or because of the role the instructor played in the program.

Professor Linda Valdez, who taught the Psychosocial, and Mother-Infant Care classes, was one of the instructors who played an informal counseling role. In the process of her class discussion of issues such as alcoholism, drug use, or abusive relationships in families, Professor Valdez felt that many of her students recognized for the first time the role that many of those issues played in their own lives. Professor Valdez argues that in addition to the professional growth these students experience in the program, they also grow at the personal level. Professor Valdez, who has a background as a midwife, has also taken an advocacy role regarding possible shortcomings of the accelerated nursing program. She argued that some of the instructors were placing inappropriate demands on the students, failing to recognize that these students were only training for an associate's degree. She considered that a nurse with an associate's degree must always work under supervision, as opposed to a nurse with a bachelor's degree. Student Diana Paz concurs with this view. She was particularly distressed over the requirement to design Patients' Care Plans. She felt that these plans, designed according to patients' conditions and which outline the type of care a patient must receive, are already standardized. While she felt that it is important to learn the underlying theory, she argues that students should not be responsible for their design.

Professor Maria Berrios, because of her role as program coordinator, usually was the first to become aware of students' personal problems. In fact, Professor Valdez feels that Professor Berrios' identification with the student, in her role as an advocate, was instrumental in the high retention rate of the program. Professor Berrios facilitated the interaction between the students and the administration, advocated for the students among the faculty, provided some of the tutorial sessions such as English and Pharmacology, and in many cases, dealt directly with many of the problems students confronted. She also had the responsibility of calling or meeting with the students who were reported to have many absences or low grades. Before dropping out, students usually explained the reasons for their decision to Professor Berrios. In most cases students had to withdraw from the program because they could not arrange a flexible work schedule, or needed to take care of an elderly relative while working and going to school, or they had small children who required more attention that they had originally anticipated. In some cases students had to work, take care of an elderly relative, and a small child. Six students had to withdraw due to illness, two students suffered the death of their spouse, one as a result of suicide, and one student withdrew because his business failed. In a couple of instances students withdrew from the program without explaining their reasons or returning Professor Berrios' phone calls. While Professor Berrios was usually successful assisting students with their academic or financial aid problems, she was less able to respond to students' personal problems. For the most part she could only advise students to withdraw until their situation

changed, or to repeat a class, taking the course in the trimester or in the regular semester program. In either case, a student had to pay full tuition for the class since the program could not finance make-up classes. Alternatively, a student could withdraw from the accelerated program but still enroll in the regular associate's degree nursing program offered by the university. This way, the student could proceed at her own pace. Professor Berrios was aware of the many issues that interfere with students' performance. In particular she underscored the difficulties of working single heads of household, who also may lack other family support. She was also concerned about some of the students' academic training, which in many cases was achieved through GEDs and as a result required students to take remedial courses to survive in the program. As a response to these circumstances, Professor Berrios felt that in order to be successful, a training program needed to provide appropriate academic strategies, comprehensive financial assistance, or a flexible work schedule. It was also evident that the group could have benefited from institutional day care services, since many students were single parents. University regulations prohibit students from bringing their children into the classroom. The day care option was outside the realm of this short-term demonstration program. In this context, however, Professor Berrios noted the need to involve other community social service agencies that can provide counseling, day care, and transportation services to help students deal with some of the obstacles. Similarly, she intimated the need to involve the work place to negotiate a flexible schedule to help nursing students to develop professionally.

By and large then, although the faculty and administration of the program expressed concern for students who were unable to graduate as a result of personal circumstances, they could not offer assistance in the form of free counseling, day care, referrals, or extended leaves of absences.

Structural Changes at the University Level

The one-year accelerated nursing program attempts to overcome the shortage of qualified RNs in the metropolitan area of San Juan, Puerto Rico. Many unemployed LPNs, and as we can see from the accelerated nursing program enrollment, many working nurses, who could not commit two years to an associate's degree program, find a one-year program attractive or more manageable. In order to make the accelerated nursing program possible, the Inter American University needed to make a series of curricular, administrative, and academic changes.

Curricular changes

In order to develop a one-year accelerated nursing program, the required courses had to fit a trimester format, which at the time, the nursing school did not offer. As soon as the school was notified that funding for the program was approved, Nursing School Director Dr. Gloria Ortiz mobilized faculty and administration to get the program off the ground. Dr. Ortiz mediated the creation of a trimester program in Spanish. The creation of a trimester program with classes offered in Spanish required special permission from the president of the university. Until then, all the courses

taught in Spanish were offered in the semester format. The university also offers courses in English in several disciplines as part of a trimester system. Many U.S.-born or U.S.-educated students can take all the required courses in English and receive a degree from the university. The trimester format and the concomitant reduction of class time is founded on the premise that the skills that practical nurses bring to the classroom can help them fulfill the associate's degree requirements in less time. By and large, the faculty of the accelerated nursing program responded positively to the institution of the trimester system.

Dr. Luisa Jara, who teaches a weekly basic science course associated with the Adult Care I and II, feels that the trimester system is better suited for working students because they can take short-term leaves from work in order to further their training. Dr. Jara is a part-time instructor who works full time at Hogar Crea, a center for the treatment of patients with substance abuse addiction. Dr. Jara is a recent recruit to the nursing school, who acknowledged a long-standing wish to teach basic science to nursing students. Dr. Jara is familiar with the training and experience of many of her students, because she had also worked as a LPN before her graduation from medical school. She claims that there are many pieces missing in her students' training, but that it is not that hard for LPNs to integrate new materials with what they already know. In her opinion, many of her students already perform the work of college graduates.

Professor Marcia Valenzuela, who teaches the bi-weekly Spanish class, also feels that the trimester system is appropriate for this program given the age and experience of the students. Professor Valenzuela has taught in the regular semester program for the last eight years. Prior to her teaching career at the Inter American University she taught Upward Bound students. Upward Bound is a federally funded program aimed to increase the academic and motivational level of economically disadvantaged high school students so that they may graduate from high school and pursue a college education. Professor Valenzuela credits her experience with Upward Bound as her impetus to develop the necessary skills to teach students from poor neighborhoods. Her nursing students generally passed her class with high marks (either As or Bs). While Professor Valenzuela did not detail the way her experience teaching Upward Bound students prepared her to teach in the accelerated nursing program, her remarks indicated a recognition of the differences in approach to teaching mainstream and economically disadvantaged students. Professor Valenzuela was working towards a doctorate degree from a university in Madrid at the time the accelerated nursing program started, and was therefore interested in teaching a class that allowed her to take the time to fulfill her other responsibilities.

On the other hand, Professor Bertha Ugarte, who teaches the Basic Adult Care II, feels that the program progressed too quickly. Professor Ugarte teaches the theoretical component of the course and coordinates hospital practices and tutorial sessions. Mario Funes, a student in the program, also expressed concern with how quickly the program progressed, in particular for students who had been out of the university for so many years. As it is, the program had to be extended an extra trimester because, as Professor Pérez, the program organizer indicated, the late start of the program could

not be compensated for through the trimesters. Another reason to extend the program one trimester until December, when the first group would graduate, was to give the students more time to take care of some academic as well as some personal problems. The academic stress results from the demands placed on the students, as it is well known that towards the end of the program courses become progressively harder. There were many students who needed to take make-up exams and 19 who needed to repeat the Adult Care II class in order to graduate. At the personal level, students expressed the need to relieve some stresses at home caused by their absences due to the demands of work and school.

In essence then, the trimester format seems to be recognized by most involved in this program, as a positive institutional change needed to fit in all the courses required for the RN nursing degree. What remains difficult to determine is the degree to which the practical experience that students bring to the program can compensate for academic experience, or under what circumstances and kind of program can best serve non-traditional adult students.

Another obstacle experienced by the LPNs interested in furthering their training is the college requirement to retake subjects already covered in practical nursing programs. This requirement extends the length of the RN training and discourages practical nurses. The accelerated nursing program allows students to take placement exams in areas already covered as part of their practical nursing training thereby reducing the time spent in the classroom. Only A & T University of North Carolina and the Hawaii Pacific University offer advance standing to LPNs as part of their bachelor's degree programs. The LPN to BSN Pathway in Nursing Program of Hawaii Pacific University offers credits in Pharmacology, and Math for Meds, upon successful completion of a written exam, and for the Nursing Concepts course, and the Nursing Skills lab students can receive credits through performance evaluation. Successful performance in these evaluations gives students a total of 10 college credits towards their BSN.

Students at the Accelerated Nursing Program of the Inter American University can receive credits for the Fundamentals of Nursing Lab, and the Adult Care Lab, by taking performance tests. This represents savings of class time and money for the student. It is possible, however, that the program could include a few more competencies that could be tested through performance tests. Diana Paz, a student from Barranquitas who had worked at the Mennonite Hospital before attending the accelerated program, expressed a certain level of impatience with the practice component of a class that required her to take blood pressure, something she had learned as a LPN. Some other students were concerned with the cost of placement exams ("convalidaciones"). Once again this may have been more of a response to the costs of the program as a whole, which given students' expectations, had become a point of contention.

Administrative changes

The administration made several changes to respond to the particular needs of the students enrolled in the accelerated program. The first one was a direct result of the institu-

tion of the trimester system within a university structured to follow a semester schedule. Institutionally the university registered and provided financial assistance to students on a semester basis, but the accelerated program required registration and the disbursement of financial assistance by trimesters. The nursing school administration, with the support of the campus chancellor and university president, enlisted the assistance of the registry and financial aid departments to make possible the proper functioning of the accelerated program. By their efforts, students were registered in the program as a group. Similarly, the nursing school administration provided orientation regarding the new accelerated program to financial aid workers. Through the intervention of Nursing School Director Dr. Ortiz, the financial aid department established a system ("sistema de prorrogas") by which students were allowed to register to classes by trimesters, although students' loans were processed by semesters. The coordination of these services made it, in fact, possible to treat students in the accelerated nursing program as a group. The program became, by all intended purposes, a "one-stop service".

Secondly, the nursing school administration appointed Professor Maria Berríos, faculty member who taught Nursing Fundamentals, as program coordinator and advisor for the year. She was chosen for that position because of her ability to connect and communicate with the students. The nursing school administration was concerned with the possible culture shock that students could encounter as they entered a relatively rigid and formal environment of the university system. Program administrators hoped that the presence of a dedicated full-time coordinator could ease the transition of non-traditional students into the university. In her capacity as program coordinator, Professor Berríos became a bridge that connected the concerns and needs of the students with the concerns and responses of the nursing school administration. By appointing Professor Berríos to this position, the nursing school director opened a direct channel of communication for the students to reach the administrative team at the nursing school. The nursing school administration, in turn, by playing an advocacy role for the students enrolled in the program, managed to attain significant responses and support from the university system.

Further along, through the initiatives of the nursing school administration, students enrolled in the accelerated program were allowed to take make-up exams for some failed classes. For example, students who failed a Math class during the second trimester were allowed to take a make-up exam, after attending review classes. The nursing school administration felt that repeating a failed non-nursing class, as mandated by the university was extremely punitive, time-wise as well as financially, for students enrolled in a short trimester program.

Regardig the selection of sites where students had to fulfill their in-hospital practice, the nursing school administration was flexible enough to allow students to work in hospitals closer to students' homes.

Another important development is the impact that the new program has had on the university system. According to Professor Bertha Ugarte, only a few years ago the college was unable to attract a sufficient number of students. It affected the school

of nursing in particular, forcing the administration to lay off five instructors. With the creation of an accelerated program that grants associate's degrees and offers LPNs a chance to become RNs, Professor Ugarte feels that students are returning to the university, thereby increasing the need for faculty, and solidifying the viability of the university system. In addition to the full-time instructors, the nursing school has recently hired new part-time instructors and hospital practice coordinators. Dr. Luisa Jara is a new part-time instructor hired to teach a basic science course to the accelerated associate's degree students, while Carmen Vasquez, a University Hospital supervisor is one of several people hired to coordinate in-hospital practices. Ms. Vasquez, who coordinated the university's neurology practice, was granted permission from her superiors to work with Professor Ugarte's morning group. After the morning session, Ms. Vasquez works her regular 8-hour job at the hospital. Ms. Vasquez was instrumental in hiring one of the students from the accelerated program at the University Hospital, and also brought one of her employees to enroll in the program.

These new hires bring along, with their professional expertise, new connections and fresh educational approaches and attitudes to the university. Students benefit from the training and from contact with prospective employers. Clearly, University Hospital supervisor Carmen Vasquez recognized the value of the training that the program provided. In hiring one of the students and in recommending one of her employees to the program she attested to this recognition. In general terms, the system of in-hospital practices can allow hospitals to participate in the training process as well as see first hand students' performance. At the same time students can establish links with perspective employers upon graduation. In turn, the university, by responding to the needs of the community, and by establishing partnerships with employers, guarantees that it will remain a viable institution.

Use of New Academic and Evaluation Approaches

At the onset of the program Nursing School Director Dr. Gloria Ortiz called for meetings with each instructor to request that they implement additional teaching strategies to assist non-traditional student. Shortly after the program began she became particularly concerned with the reports by the English and Mathematics instructors that indicated that many students had serious deficiencies in those areas. As a response each department scheduled tutorial sessions. At the end of each quarter, instructors were also required to submit reports on special classroom activities that they had utilized.

The Pharmacology instructor, for instance, evaluated and helped students by using diverse learning strategies. That instructor assigned special projects, poster presentations to reinforce class material, and after each class he offered voluntary tutorial sessions. Calculators and conversion tables were allowed during the tests. The Basics of Nursing instructor utilized discussions of hypothetical clinical situations to stimulate student participation and reinforce previous knowledge. Since students performed very well on verbal discussions of principles of nursing but were less capable of presenting the information in written form, the class was divided into small groups in order to highlight individual participation. In the English class, students practiced new vocabu-

lary from their textbooks through conversations in pairs, and also presented oral and written reports. Evaluation in the English class was based on written reports, group assignments, oral presentations, and class participation. The Mathematics instructors utilized group work, practice homework, calculators, peer tutoring, and cooperative work as part of their teaching strategies. Students were evaluated solely with written tests by one instructor and by written tests, labs, and special assignment by another.

Professor Linda Valdez, instructor of the Mother-Infant Care class (Nursing 2141) included video presentations along with her lectures. She stopped these videos periodically to discuss particular sections. Professor Valdez evaluated her students by means of open book exams, take-home exams, and regular in-class quizzes. She felt this approach was needed given the particular circumstances of the group. The Spanish language instructor, Professor Marcia Valenzuela, indicated that students in the accelerated nursing program required constant practice, but that otherwise they were no different from other students. Professor Valenzuela made a clear distinction between the mainstream semester students that she regularly taught and the adult students participating in the accelerated program. She sought to accommodate their needs by including more in-classroom practice exercises. Professor Eloisa Roldán agrees with this approach. She was of the opinion that, for the adult students in this program, all the class objectives must be met in the classroom, because students have very limited time to study at home. She argued that this is the case even for those students who were unemployed because they also have family responsibilities.

In addition to these strategies there were also many individual approaches and preferences that instructors implemented in their classes. In regards to the selection of textbooks, instructors differed significantly. While some instructors emphasized the use of textbooks, selecting either English or Spanish language textbooks, other instructors preferred to provide handouts with information culled from many sources. For instance, both Adult Care II (Nursing 2233) instructors assigned English language textbooks, but Professor Ugarte also provided handouts. Professor Eloisa Roldán assigned an English textbook to her Nursing Fundamentals class (Nursing 1121) and a Spanish language textbook to her hospital practice in Maternity Care (Nursing 2142). Professor Cristina Soldano, who taught the hospital practice component of Adult Care II (Nursing 2234) assigned a Spanish language textbook, which she felt was not as good as the English version, but she did so because she believed students would have an easier time understanding it. Professor Linda Valdez, who taught the Psychosocial and Mother and Newborn Care (Nursing 2141) assigned English language textbooks, which the students translated in class as a group activity. Professor Valdez acknowledged that textbooks in Spanish were more expensive than English textbooks, and although she did not make the purchase of a book mandatory in her class, she felt, nevertheless, that all classes had to have a textbook. Routinely, Professor Valdez lent her own book, over the weekend, to those students who didn't have textbooks. This temporary solution addresses the problem of students' inability to purchase books and it will likely remain until a systemic solution can be put in place.

On the other hand, Professor Jara, who taught a different section of the Adult Care II class, didn't assign a textbook. Instead, she prepared hand-written handouts, culled from material from several books, which she distributed to students free of charge. The handouts were usually from 4 to 6 pages long, hand-written in Spanish, and containing many illustrations as well the relevant information for exams. These handouts resembled the type of class outlines that medical students receive as part of a package for many of their courses.

Instructors also differed in their attitudes towards their students. Almost without exception, the nursing faculty committed their time and energy to support the accelerated program, offering after-class tutorial sessions, reorganizing their material to make it more accessible to students, or suggesting new ways for the students to study and learn the material. Some instructors, however, experienced a certain level of frustration with students' limitations, or with the obstacles that prevented students from performing at the level of the traditional (more privileged) students. Other instructors, recognizing the obstacles in the life of their students, assumed the challenge by devising alternative teaching strategies. One of the instructors, for instance, expressed a certain level of frustration with students' low attendance at her non-mandatory after-class tutorial sessions, particularly since the sessions were scheduled as a response to students' request. She was also concerned with students' inability to assume a professional role as opposed to their former technical role, and their difficulty integrating the more theoretical material with their practical experience. Most instructors agreed that this difficulty to integrate theory and practice is a common problem for students in the accelerated program. This instructor seemed to express her commitment to students by upholding what she proudly refers to as "standards." That attitude makes her appear much less flexible than other faculty who argue for a consideration of students' circumstances.

On the other hand, some instructors seemed less embattled and more optimistic about the academic performance of the group. Professor Ugarte, for instance, recognized the same obstacles, financial and personal problems experienced by the students, but overall she felt that the training was appropriate and on target, and that students performed satisfactorily, and would be successful RNs. While she didn't feel that she could venture a forecast concerning students' performance on the RN board exam, she had planned to offer nursing board review classes before graduation. Professor Ugarte has experience teaching nursing board exam workshops for the Kaplan Preparation Services, which, she feels, can give students a needed edge.

Professor Ugarte's opinion seems grounded in her classroom experience. Her class met twice a week from 7 to 10:30 in the morning. The early meetings appealed to working students, and as a result, all but three of her students were working LPNs. Professor Ugarte felt that the recent practical experience of the group helped them understand and contextualize the theoretical material she presented. It is also possible that their employment status gave this group a higher level of self-respect and self-esteem, compared to a group of unemployed students. Professor Ugarte's accepting attitude seems to stem from an understanding of the changing roles of the university

and the benefits that a new influx of students brings to that institution, allowing it to expand services, foster growth and increase the demand for nursing teaching jobs.

Beyond the particular differences and attitudes of the two groups of instructors, their points of view are illustrative of the larger issues and visions co-existing within the university and within the nursing program. In broad strokes it seems that some faculty and administrators feel that disadvantaged students deserve a chance, which the university can provide, and in the process the university can grow as an institution. On the other hand, others feel that the university is giving students a chance, for which students should be thankful. The second attitude may cause a level of frustration for instructors when confronted with the limitations students bring to the classroom. The first attitude acknowledges students' right to an opportunity but must face the challenge of making their institution more open to non-traditional students, while at the same time confronting the obstacles that interfere with students' performance.

Links to Employers

The first objective of the accelerated nursing program was to enhance the career mobility of LPNs by providing them with the opportunity to complete an associate's degree in sciences within a 12-month period. After graduation students can take the nursing board exam offered in Puerto Rico in May and November. The program wasn't designed to offer job placements to its graduates or to provide ongoing support after graduation. There was, however, one informal instance of a student getting hired by a supervisor at a hospital where she conducted her clinical training. Carmen Vasquez, the hospital supervisor who coordinated the neurology practices at University Hospital for Professor Bertha Ugarte's class (Nursing 2234), was instrumental in hiring one of the students from the accelerated nursing program. Practice Supervisor Toledo was granted free time in the morning from her superiors, which allowed her to work with Professor Ugarte's group. Ms. Toledo also helped one of her employees to enroll in the accelerated program. Professor Eloisa Roldán also acknowledged students' confidence in a hospital setting. She conducted hospital practices in the area of Mother and Infant care at the Municipal Hospital, and in doing so, she noticed that her students had a positive interaction with hospital personnel. In fact, two of her students had previously worked in that hospital, which may have facilitated students' good performance. This interaction of students and hospital personnel through the program's hospital practicum had an informal positive effect on the future employment prospects for program graduates.

Students' performance in a hospital setting prompted Professor Elvira Rosas to articulate an ideal program, with smaller classes held in a hospital setting, where students' practical training could be integrated with the more theoretical material. Ideally, this accelerated program could be offered to hospital workers or to students hired by hospitals as LPNs or nurses' aids. Professor Rosas acknowledges the limitations of this model, particularly in the area of credit recognition, however it recognizes the limitations of the traditional academic model. The program had initially assumed that unemployed nurses could dedicate more time to the program, and thereby achieve a higher rate of success, however, preliminary discussions indicate that working nurses, in spite of

their time constrains, have similar or higher grade averages. The suggestion of a training program sponsored or co-sponsored by a hospital and a university could facilitate career development courses for hospital employees, and financial assistance provided by both institutions. These conditions would remove some of the pressure associated with education financing and job search after graduation. In turn hospitals would increase their number of qualified personnel and create a career ladder for their employees. Currently, there are no hospital-affiliated schools offering RN level training in Puerto Rico.

Outcome

The Program to Upgrade Licensed Practical Nurses was conceived as a 12-month training programs to provide financial and educational support to a group of 40 students working toward an associates' degree in nursing and RN certification. The program restructured its curriculum to fit into a trimester mode, however, it was forced to extend classes an additional trimester in order in order to assist a large number of students who failed nursing class as well as a few who had personal problem. The program measures its success in terms of graduation, as well as by the numbers of graduates who pass the RN Board exam.

Graduation rate

As of August 1997, the Program to Upgrade Licensed Practical Nurses at the Inter American University had a retention rate of 73 percent, with students still needing to complete one last quarter added on to the three quarter initially scheduled and the two summer sessions. By the end of the program the percentage of graduates remained the same because the program was able to accommodate the 19 students who failed the Adult Care II class. These students expressed the desire to graduate at the end of the year, and the nursing school administration requested permission from the university to allow these students to carry the extra credits.

The response to this outcome varies among the faculty. Professor Linda Valdez felt that a more rigorous recruitment, screening, and selection of the students could have solved or obviated many of the problems the program confronted. In her opinion the program should select students with a stronger desire to grow and advance. While the profile of a successful student can only emerge at the end of the program, after graduation taking into consideration grades and post-graduate experience, it is interesting to note the remarkable performance of working nurses. While it may seem counter-intuitive that busy working LPNs would be interested in the program, it is possible now to appreciate their incentive. They might have considered the possibility of advancement within their jobs, and pay increases through this accelerated four-trimester program, which in addition offered supplementary income through a stipend. We are left to wonder why more qualified unemployed LPNs failed to connect with the program. It is possible that the outreach program, given the time limitations, was ineffective in reaching LPNs, or that alternatively, unemployed nurses were too disconnected from the field. If we were to learn that unemployed nurses experience more difficulties reaching the program, that would add an additional challenge to the

recruitment, as well as to our understanding of the needs of non-traditional students. Preliminary data indicate that on the one hand working LPNs perform as well or better than unemployed LPNs, while on the other hand it seems that family demands, such as the presence of small children, may have a larger impact on the performance of non-traditional students. Overall, these data suggest a need for an extended training program that focuses on skills and knowledge acquisition or competency-based approaches instead of the accelerated approach in order to counter some of the academic as well as personal barriers facing non-traditional students.

RN Board Exam Approval Rate

Nursing board examinations are scheduled twice a year in Puerto Rico during May and December. Candidates are allowed to take the board exam three times before they are required to enroll in a program to retake nursing courses. If candidates don't pass the RN exam they can continue working as LPNs. As originally designed, students would have completed the program in time to take the nursing board exam scheduled for November, but after extending the program an extra quarter, the first class, which graduated in December, had to wait until May. Professor Eugenia Pérez, the program organizer, expressed some concern with the difficulties that students were experiencing with the upper level nursing courses because performance in these classes was poor and indicated that they might have difficulty passing the RN nursing board exam. During the third quarter, 57 percent of the students failed a nursing class. That figure represents a dramatic increase over the first quarter, when there were no failures in nursing classes, and over the second quarter when there was only a 2.5 percent failure.

On the other hand, some of the faculty had a more optimistic assessment of students' performance. Professor Valdez compared the trimester classes to the classes she teaches in the regular semester, and felt that they were not particularly different. She felt that LPNs brought the advantage of their experience to the classroom. Professor Valdez felt very optimistic about this group's prospects, but remained critical of other members of the faculty whom, she argued, were too demanding of the students. She considered that unlike a nurse with a bachelor's degree, a nurse with an associate's degree must always work under supervision, and therefore she considered many demands that some faculty placed on the trimester students inappropriate. Further, she feels that the process of education must be understood as continuous, and therefore faculty and students should see the associate's degree as a step towards a bachelor's degree.

Professor Luisa Jara was also satisfied with students' performance, feeling that in spite of the many pieces missing in their LPN training, it wasn't hard for them to integrate the new material with what they already knew. She expressed surprise that all the students in one section had failed a class. She taught the other section where all the students performed very well and many passed with high marks. Likewise, Professor Ugarte was optimistic about the outcome of the program. She argued that her many years of teaching experience give her confidence that the training they are providing is appropriate and on target. She also felt that students could benefit from nursing board exam review sessions, which she was prepared to offer before graduation. Professor

Ugarte has experience teaching nursing board exam workshops for the Kaplan Preparation Services. She felt that with the training and the review sessions students have a good chance of performing well on the board exam and in the workplace.

In fact, graduates of the Accelerated Associate's Degree Program performed very well on the Nursing Board exam. Nineteen students took the Nursing Board exam in May and 18 students or 95 percent passed the exam. The previous year 93 percent of the students enrolled in the Bachelor's program who took the two-year associate's degree exit option passed the Associate's Nursing Board exam. The significant fact is not that the two groups are performing at the same level, or that the students in the accelerated program are performing at a slightly higher level, but that non-traditional students enrolled in an accelerated degree program performed at as high a level as traditional students.

Conclusion

When, in December of 1997, the Inter American University's Program to Upgrade Licensed Practical Nurses graduated its first class, the program fulfilled its promise of providing academic and financial support necessary to allow a group of disadvantaged students to obtain an associate's degree in nursing. The program successfully met its goal of graduating a very dedicated group of students committed to advancing in the nursing profession. The program features several positive outcomes and underscored several lessons learned in the process.

In terms of positive outcomes, the program:

- Had a very low attrition rate: As of September 1997, 40 students remained in the program, out of 54 who started. This represents a 73 percent retention rate for the program. The program also boasts a 56 percent graduation rate
- Identified methods of instruction such as the tutorial sessions, the in-class homework and discussions, and the handouts to assist non-traditional students.
- Identified instructors capable of providing the expertise and training needed by non-traditional students.
- Identified the leadership of a committed administration as an essential factor to implement a program for non-traditional students within a large traditional university system.
- Identified administrative structures conducive to the advancement of the adult working learner, including the trimester system, the appointment of a full-time program coordinator, financial aid, counseling, and the need to at least a part-time program director.

The Nursing School Adminstration also learned a few lessons as a result of a series of challenges the program confronted. Some of these lessons may be pertinent to other nursing programs attempting to develop services for non-traditional students.

- The need to extend the length of the program to help students deal with academic as well as personal problems. The program was in fact extended an extra trimester.
- The need to provide supplemental instruction in the areas of Mathematics,

English, and Pharmacology. The program offered tutorial sessions in those areas, make-up exam review session, make-up exams, and workshops on study skills.

- The need to provide extensive financial assistance. The program organized financial aid workshops for the students and an orientation session for financial aid officers. In addition, the program coordinator was assigned the responsibility of assisting students with their financial aid queries.
- The need to implement additional teaching strategies targeted for non-traditional students. At the onset of the program nursing school administrators promoted the use of diverse teaching strategies.

We conducted the on site assessment and interviews of program participants before the last quarter was completed during August 1997. The delay in the completion of the program had as much to do with the haphazard start of the program (due to the late notification of the grant approval), as with the demands and stresses that the students faced. Teachers and students recognized that the intensity of an accelerated one-year program required much more dedication and commitment than a regular four-semester program. In addition to the multiple extracurricular commitments that adult students have, many students had been away from the classroom for a number of years. While on average, students had ten years of health care experience, those were also the number of years they had been away from the classroom.

Although the program was explicitly designed to attract unemployed LPNs, 50 percent of the students enrolled in the program were working LPNs. Either this group of working LPNs was very motivated to advance in their career, or there are some other factors that kept qualified unemployed LPNs from connecting with the program. Whatever the reason, the program had to contend with the time constraints experienced by working nurses Students' schedules were very tight, so much so that it was common to see a few students wearing their work uniforms in class, indicative that they were on their way to work or just came from work. In spite of these circumstances, by the end of the year 73 percent of the students graduated from the program. These figures were achieved through the dedication of students, faculty, and administration, and through the constant encouragement of the faculty, and the program coordinator.

The program also identified committed faculty in tune with the demands and circumstances of students' life, who rose to the occasion by spending additional class time and energy working with the students. In only a few occasions did the students' and traditional instructors' inability to meet the needs of non-traditional students mar an otherwise exemplary program.

Structurally, the program sought to obviate the need for students to repeat classes taken in the past or to take classes in which students had practical competencies by crediting practical experience through placement exams. More importantly, the program offered all the courses needed to earn an associate's degree in a trimester format. This trimester format has become a permanent feature of the university's Associate's Degree in Nursing, and represents another innovative step in a career ladder that can

help students complete a Bachelor's degree. The trimester format was praised almost across the board by the faculty but received a mixed review by the students. Many felt that the program went too fast and required strong academic foundations. While intuitively, it may be expected that working nurses would have the most difficulties keeping up with the academic load, it is interesting to note that there was no clear correlation between employment status and grades, and in some cases, working students performed slightly better than unemployed students. There appears to be much more of a correlation between family responsibilities and academic performance.

The students' age and socioeconomic background presented a challenge to the program beyond the purely academic or financial. Since many students were single heads of household, many of those who quit or withdrew from the program did so as a result of their need to work, or take care of children or relatives. It became clear that in that context, a more effective program needed to provide a wider range of services such as day care, counseling, and referrals to community agencies. Unfortunately, those services were beyond the scope of this limited demonstration project. As it was, the personal challenges affected not only those who dropped out from the program, but also those who remained. The program dealt with this situation by extending classes an extra quarter, ostensibly to allow students who failed courses to catch up with the rest of the group, but also to help the rest of the students deal with their many personal demands.

By the end of 1997 it was obvious that the program had been an outstanding success, as it had graduated 56 percent of the students. By and large then, it would seem that this success was determined by how well the institution, in this case the nursing school faculty and administration, recognized the many strengths and limitations of non-traditional students, and brought changes to the university to make it more responsive to the needs of non-traditional students. In so doing the program can be consider a model for institutions creating career ladders within university systems.

Protocol

Inter-American University of Puerto Rico: Upgrading LPN to RN Program

Rationale

The Inter American University Program to Upgrade LPNs to RNs was designed to serve the large community of unemployed and under-employed LPNs currently living in the metropolitan area of San Juan, Puerto Rico. At the time the interviews were conducted only 4 of the 5 trimesters had been completed. Interviews and analysis are taking place before the last trimester ended and before significant goals can be measured.

Context

- There is a large pool of applicants interested in getting admitted to the program.
- The university can increase enrollment and provide training to a large community of LPNs
- The accelerated trimester program is founded on the premises that: LPNs have practical experience that can be validated by the university, and unemployed adult students can dedicate a considerable amount of time for a year to obtain an Associate's Degree in a program that prepares them to take the RN boards.

The questions were oriented towards determining to what extend the program responds to the needs of the student, or conversely, to what degree the student can obtain the most benefit from the program. While the actual success of failure of the program can only be measured by considering the number of students who graduate, pass the board exam and obtain employment as working RNs, there are many elements worth considering in a successful program.

Since the working experience of this adult students average from 5 to 10 years, and since they are returning to a learning institution after a prolonged absence, the questions tried to elucidate what academic, economic and administrative support is necessary and adequate for the working adult student. In essence we were asking the question: How does the university respond to the needs of a working adult learner?

In addition, we explored what administrative and pedagogical adaptations were in place in order to reach the student. Further, the questions attempted to evaluate the motivations and commitment of the students, and the changes that were necessary in their part in order to successfully complete an accelerated program of study.

Questions to faculty

What strengths do the students bring to the classroom?
What barriers do students experience?
How does the institution or the program take advantage of the students' strengths?
How does the program compensate or ameliorate barriers to the students' success?

Did you change your approach with this group of students?
Did you do anything new in the classroom, laboratory, or hospital practice?
What's the advantage of shortening the academic curriculum into trimesters?
What's the disadvantage? Is there anything lost in an accelerated one-year program?
Is the one year-5 trimester program equivalent to a semester program?
Upon graduation, are these students as well trained as any other average student?
Do you foresee many of these students passing their board exam on first try?
Can you comment on any striking or outstanding experience occurring during your teaching of this program?

Questions to students

How did you find out about the program?
What did you find attractive about the program?
Have you look into other programs?
What would you add to the program?
What would you take from the program?
What was your experience with the administration?
What was your experience with the faculty?
What was your experience with other students?
Where your family or friends supportive of your efforts?
Where your coworkers or supervisors supportive or encouraging?
Do you feel that the university support is appropriate and sufficient?
Can you comment on the least difficult aspect of this program?
Can you comment on the most difficult aspect of this program?
Are you confident that you can do well in the board exams?

Questions to Program Coordinator

What is your role as a coordinator?
Can you identify some of the strength you see in this group of students?
Can you comment on some the barriers to students' success?
How can the university help the students overcome those barriers to success?
How can the faculty help the students?
How can students help themselves and each other overcome some of the barriers to their academic success?
How do you, as a coordinator, and the university deal with the particular circumstances of the students' lives?
Can you comment on a particular strength of the program?
Can you comment on a particular shortcoming of the program?

Questions to the School of Nursing Director

What do you believe is the role of this program within the context of the university system?
What is your role as director in the development of this program?
What is the significance of this program for nursing?

What is, in your opinion, the main success or failure of this program?
What are the lessons to be drawn from the first year of the program?
Are there elements of this program that can be integrated into the structure of the university?
How did the university respond to the new approaches used in this program?
Was the university administration supportive of the program?

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